

Counterinsurgency: Adapting to the 21st Century

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Counterinsurgency:
Adapting to the 21st Century
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Submitted by Captain PJ Ovalle
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Major PJ Nugent, CG 10
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INTRODUCTION

Insurgent activity in the 21st Century has some distinctions from past insurgencies. The battlefield of Iraq is where we are facing these new changes, and the driving force behind these attacks is a desire to prevent Iraq from transitioning to a democracy. Insurgent forces hinder Iraq's struggle towards democracy by seeking to disrupt its progress. In order to face these challenges and achieve a successful campaign, one must consider a few topics. The first is to understand the current environment from which insurgents are operating. Second, today's forces need to prepare to operate within this environment, and they need the ability to adapt as insurgents adapt and change their tactics.

Understanding the Current Environment

Insurgents conducting attacks in Iraq are able to occupy entire cities, as demonstrated in Fallujah. Within these cities, they occupy safe havens from which to plan attacks and store weapons against Allied/Coalition forces. Typical tactics include constructing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and remote-controlled roadside bombs. These tactics have had devastating effects on convoys and personnel. Additionally, these cities offer a number of sites insurgents can use to conceal weapons caches. The insurgents are clever in the sense that they are using sites such as mosques and cemeteries to

store weapons. Even though some sites are known to harbor insurgents, this is not easy to deal with, as observed in Fallujah. Although these locations harbor enemy activity, resolving the problem is not easy. Concerns about violating religious buildings could elicit an adverse reaction from the local population, and this is a factor that Coalition forces must take into account. Thus, the act of western forces attacking or entering mosques has been prohibited in order to prevent offending the local populace. Not until both US and Iraqi forces isolated Fallujah with the purpose of clearing it of all insurgents did the opportunity to counteract this modus operandi begin to deal an effective blow against the insurgents.

Today's battlefield requires a smarter approach to counterinsurgency. In addition, this is made more complex when the simultaneous goal of winning the hearts and minds is taken into account and the prevention of offending the local culture. Mark Kukis of the National Journal suggests, "Win the trust and affection of civilians, and they'll reveal what they know."¹ Because insurgents blend in with the local population, it is unlikely that Coalition forces can achieve any real success without the aid of the Iraqi civilians.

Another point that counter-insurgency forces must consider is providing a safe environment for civilians and Iraqi

¹ Kukis, Mark. "Counterinsurgency 101". Washington: National Journal, 2004

authorities to operate free from insurgent attacks. Ensuring the success of Iraqi forces to provide protection for the local population will enhance the overall opinion that a transition to democracy is attainable, and this will provide confidence for the Iraqi people.

Along with this, Coalition forces must ensure the protection of construction and rebuilding efforts. The winning of the hearts and minds of the local population as well as their trust will be expedited if counter-insurgency operations can sustain this environment. Kukis described one solution that can help with this by recommending that, "...Iraqi units would probably operate more effectively if they, for at least a period of time, had a few American personnel with them...provide them air power, and medical evacuation...."²

Preparing for today's counterinsurgency operations

Tom Gjelten, reporting for National Public Radio, interviewed retired Lieutenant General William Wallace and Colonel Thomas Hammes (USMC) in November 2004. During the interview, General Wallace discussed the newly revised U.S. Army manual on counterinsurgency. The manual states that, "defeating an insurgent force requires more than objective superiority over it. More important are political reforms, civic action projects and the restoration of basic government services in areas

² Kukis, Mark. "Counterinsurgency 101". Washington: National Journal, 2004

affected by an insurgency."³ Colonel Hammes adds, "we're constantly improving the quality of the insurgent. And they are learning; it's a learning organization. You can see that in the patterns of attacks, in the complexity of the attacks and how well targeted and timed they are."⁴

With this understanding, it is evident that in preparing to operate in today's insurgency battlefield, forces will need to continue gaining intelligence on insurgent activities. Timely and accurate intelligence will allow commanders to train forces to counter these attacks.

Additionally, any counter-insurgency effort needs to provide projects that seek to provide basic services to the local population in a timely manner. The population should be able to discern a large benefit from the transition towards democracy over the previous government and its quality of life or lack thereof. This comes down to basic living standards such as running water and adequate electricity. If the Iraqi population can make this discernment, then it will be much easier to influence them in a positive, thus they will be more inclined to provide information about insurgent activities.

Continuing to adapt as insurgents adapt

³ Metz, Steven. "Unlearning Counterinsurgency". Washington: The Officer, Dec 2004

⁴ Metz, Steven. "Unlearning Counterinsurgency". Washington: The Officer, Dec 2004

One could conclude that once any degree of success is attained against the insurgents, their demise will soon follow. However, this is historically inaccurate. Insurgents change tactics as they continue to seek their goals. Therefore, it is necessary to remain vigilant, adapt as they adapt, and keep unrelenting pressure on them. Kukis cites British military strategist Sir Robert Thompson's book, "Defeating Communist Insurgency", as one of the best books written on counterinsurgency. In the book, Thompson refers to the successful operation of British forces in Malaya, where the British defeated the insurgency by, "steadily taking bits of territory from guerrillas and then ensuring they never lost them."⁵ The recent attack against insurgents in Fallujah was a tactical victory. However, if the insurgents who fled rather than remained to fight simply moved their base of operations to another city, then Coalition forces can expect continued attacks. The pursuit of the insurgents, wherever they are, must continue or US/Coalition forces will face another "Fallujah" in a different location. Insurgents do not attack in a conventional manner. Their attacks will continue to employ asymmetric warfare tactics, although it will be limited to a small scale. These attacks will be effective in most cases, unless they lose their capability to organize and operate.

⁵ Kukis, Mark. "Counterinsurgency 101". Washington: National Journal, 2004

According to Kukis, continuing "Fallujah" style attacks will, "force insurgents to gather in concentrations elsewhere in the country where they can be confronted, and it denies them areas of retreat."⁶

Another aspect of current insurgent activity is the manner in which it is organized. In the past, insurgents organized themselves within a hierarchy and they received state support from countries friendly to them. However, as Steven Metz of "The Officer" writes, "Insurgency is mutating. Modern insurgents tend to adopt looser, networked structures rather than hierarchical ones. Because they cannot count on state sponsors, they undertake criminal activity or ally themselves with global organized crime. The form of available sanctuary, the nature of allies and partners, and the ideological framework of insurgency all are changing."

In order to continue to adapt to today's insurgent forces, it is necessary to look beyond the tactical picture, look at the broader network from which they are generating support, and attack that.

SUMMARY

The insurgent activity in Iraq is an adapting operation that has a different method of organization than that of past insurgencies. This requires the United States to adapt as well.

⁶ Kukis, Mark. "Counterinsurgency 101". Washington: National Journal, 2004

This should be not only at the tactical level but also at a higher level to seek those individuals and groups that are aiding the insurgents. If the United States and its allies are able to accomplish this, then perhaps success will occur sooner rather than later.

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